

From the war diary of B. v. Beckerath, Krefeld

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The sun set gloriously on April 23, 1918 and gilded the treetops of the Hangard forest, which were just beginning to turn green, with its last rays. The steeple of Villers-Bretonneux stood out sharply against the west, which was increasingly turning red. English observation posts were set up there at once, peering sharply at us. Did they notice what had been preparing for days?

Far behind us came the sound of a launch. The thunder rolled dully and came back from the Hangard forest with triple echoes.

The missile came closer and closer, high above our heads. There - like a volcano in the village in front of us, a huge amount of rubble, dust and stones flew up and stood out against the blood-red background like a menacing giant fist. Now the sound of the exploding projectile came back to us. It took almost five minutes for the swirls of dust to clear. But the spire of the church was gone.

"The fellows probably won't dare to go back up there anytime soon!" laughed an NCO.

The sky, meanwhile, had turned a blood-red color. The house next to the church was ablaze, bright against the darkening and darkening horizon. The first stars twinkled in the east. The guns fell silent again. The trees rustled peacefully in the evening breeze.

Since the evening of April 21 we have been lying here, a kilometer west of Marcelcave. The trenches were only hastily dug, barely 1.50 m deep; Shelters were not available. Two and two men each had to dig a hole in the front wall of the ditch in order to be secured from at least three sides against explosives and shrapnel.

We weren't allowed to be seen during the day, we always had to bend down. When planes came, we crept into our caves, which were covered with a tarpaulin. But as soon as it got dark, we came alive. Then we climbed onto the edge of the ditch, stretched our stiff bones, and did this and that we didn't have the opportunity to do during the day. At 11 a.m. the field kitchen came forward and we received our warm food as well as bread, butter, sausage etc. for the next day.

It was the same on April 23rd. Nothing suggested anything special. And yet we knew that we should attack in the next few days. In fact, April 21 had already been set aside for this.

Michel, the sublime chef, acted very secretive. He was always the first to know about all the news, but he never revealed anything about it, only giving faint hints. Now he said:

"Who knows how far I'll have to drive with the kitchen tomorrow!"

"Why, Michele?"

"Oh, I just meant it!"

"Make yourself clearer!"

"How can I express myself more clearly if I don't know anything myself!"

"Then don't say anything at all next time, you old wire bastard!"

"Here, you malcontent, you have another puff!"

The man who was addressed in this way did not need to be told twice, but willingly held out his cooking utensils, because today it was rice with veal.

Two hours later we were alarmed, that is, it was announced as quietly as possible that we should be ready to attack. Then we had to creep as close as possible to the enemy position and hide in shell holes. Hardly had this happened when a mighty barrage broke out on the German side, which lasted two hours. During that period I slept as best I could in the face of the crashing and bursting.

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When I woke up again—probably because the fire suddenly stopped—it was already dusk. But a dense fog had spread and could not be seen more than three paces. The command: "On—march, march!" sounded, and with "Hurrah" we penetrated into the first English trenches. But Tommy was smarter; he had long since withdrawn, leaving a few machine-gun nests behind, from which we were not badly fired. The bullets whistled around our ears, but none hit me.

At first it was a scary feeling. After a short time you don't notice anything anymore, and you don't even think about death, which flies around you in the form of a thousand possibilities.

Comrades left and right cried out, grabbed their chests or their heads and then fell over. How hard do you get! Even further ahead, you didn't have time to look sideways.

I was always with my friend Gerhard Nuhlen, with whom I had already made friends in the "Franzern".

A tall haystack appeared in front of us; we quickly accepted it. Several monsters appeared out of the fog, large rectangular boxes rolling closer and closer, as if pushed by some invisible force. Now one came near us. A machine gun was constantly firing in front; a small piece of artillery also fired its deadly shells at the English with a short sharp crack. Large iron crosses marked the German tank. Unhindered by ditches, shell holes and barricades, the colossi inexorably crept towards the enemy, destroying everything in their path. We let the tanks do the work, and it wasn't long before we were free to move on. The farm in front of us, which soon became visible through the haze, was named as the provisional destination. Then 20-30 Englishmen came running with much shouting and [518] hands raised. A picture to laugh at. We pointed to the back to indicate that they would probably find more fellow sufferers there. Around the farm there were several English trenches, into which we jumped; partly to catch our breath a little, partly to rummage through it for all sorts of edibles. I put a few cans of corned beef in my grenade bag, which was already empty; I ignored the masses of white bread lying around—it was too dry. But it must have found a lover.

While we were resting, someone suddenly yelled:

"Watch out, the Tommys are coming!" "Where where?" called our battalion commander, Rittm. v. Walterstorff. "Machine guns out!" Ahead of us, many figures appeared in the fog. However, one could not distinguish whether they were really English or German.

"Shoot, fellows!" the Rittmeister yells.

"No!" came the reply, "We don't shoot at our own comrades!" In between, the call sounded: "They are Germans!" "No, it's Tommy's!" Meanwhile the troop had come closer. The flat English steel helmets of the first were clearly recognizable.

"Fire!" commanded the Rittmeister.

"Stop, stop, there are Germans among them, you can clearly see them by their steel helmets!" "Quiet, wait!" shouted our company leader, Lt. paal.

Now the arrivals were only 20 steps away from us.—"Out of the trenches!" came the young officer's voice.

Only then did it become clear what we had gotten our hands on: there were about 50 Germans who, having fallen into English captivity, were to be transported behind the front by almost twice as many Englishmen. But the fog had fooled the Tommys and saved the Germans for this time. When they suddenly found themselves surrounded by us, they had no choice but to stretch their arms and raise their hands.

It was a funny situation and we couldn't help but laugh out loud. But our freed comrades found all their weapons very close by.—

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The fog had cleared more and more. We couldn't stay at the Ferme forever, especially since Tommy also started to make us happy with shrapnel.

"Swarm out to the left!" A wide field lay before us. On the right the ruins of Villers-Bretonneux, on the left the village of Cachy, in the background the Bois d'Abé, the forest of Amiens. The enemy had re-established themselves in this line. As we advanced across that field, undisturbed by the whistling bullets with which Tommy delighted us, I heard a loud scream beside me. "Bruno, come quickly, I'm wounded!" That was my friend Gerhard! I turned around immediately, but he waved me off again. "Just leave me lying; there is no man to be spared at the front!"

But I knelt down next to him and saw that he was shot in the thigh. Without further ado, I pulled out my knife, cut open his pants and bandaged him at least makeshift. "Now go and join the company," said Gerhard, biting his teeth in pain, "should fate decide that I should lie here and die, say hello to my parents if you're happy come home.—Now give me another cigarette so I don't have to wait long." I gave him a box and lit one myself. "So Gerhard,—all the best!" I shook hands with my best comrade once more and then went after the company with a heavy heart.

We had meanwhile turned more to the left, towards Cachy, when suddenly five small French tanks came towards us from the village at great speed. But we had received support: the Woehlke shock battery drove up behind us! Two shots—and the first tank stopped. Two more shots and the second was dead. And so on, until all five stopped moving. Three burst into flames and burned all day long [519] into the night. I still don't understand what is supposed to have fed the fire for so long. Those things are made entirely of steel, and I don't think they could store that much petrol and oil.

On this occasion, however, we had gone too far to the left and had to turn right again in order not to lose touch with the battalion turn around. As if the Englishman had just been waiting for this, he let his machine guns rattle like crazy, and we had to dance to this tune and jump from one shell hole to the other. Fortunately we reached the port without any casualties. Airplanes whirred and buzzed, and we advanced slowly but surely. Villers-Bretonneux was already in German possession by noon, and around 6 o'clock we were able to shoot up green flares as a sign that the day's goal had been reached: the first crossroads in the Abbé forest.

Here we had to dig in and, as the order was, repulse all counterattacks. A fallen signpost assured us that we were only 8km from Amiens at this point.

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Night fell. But not as peaceful and quiet as 24 hours ago. All around us the thunder of the artillery boomed, the small rifle fire crackled, the machine guns rattled, the mines swished, the trajectory of which could be traced on the comet-like bright tail, until they exploded in the forest with a tremendous crash and a thousand echoes.

"Will we get our food tonight?" was the common question. However, during the course of the day I had pocketed everything I could find to eat. That was good because it was 36 hours before we could eat anything warm.

At 9 o'clock the message came that we should be ready to be relieved. A sigh of relief went through our ranks, because the day had made enormous demands. Really, half an hour later we were able to leave. It went back in a long line. First to the Ferme. I thought of Gerhard, where would he be now—? Hopefully he had been found by paramedics.

When we reached the farm, the Tommy opened up a wild shrapnel fire, so that we all jumped into the trenches. It was pitch black, the howling, hissing, cracking, and bursting around us drowning out every other sound. It was like all hell had let loose!

Then red flares shone in front: "Barrage—counterattack!" I knew: our night's rest was over for the night. When I looked around for my comrades, there was no one to be found. I called—no one answered as all hell banged around me. During a pause came the call: "Tanks are coming!" to me. I heard chains jingling and rattling; someone shot off a flare. Then I saw people flooding back. It was fighting within me: Should I go back now too?—No—that would be cowardly. But staying here, didn't that mean consecrating oneself to certain death?—And if so! Loyalty to the Kaiser and to the Fatherland!—

As time went on, things calmed down. The fire had subsided. Now Tommy must be here soon, I thought as I lit my last cigar. Looking back at the bluish smoke, images of home rose before my eyes. I don't know how long I was so occupied with my thoughts;—an impact near me tore me back into harsh reality. I looked over the edge of the ditch—not an Englishman was to be seen.

Now it's getting too stupid for me, I thought, and swung myself out of the ditch. At the next impact, I saw a lone figure standing on the path and walked toward it. It was our Rittmeister.

"5. Company with a private on hand!" I reported.

"Thank God, at least one soul!" said the battalion commander while shaking my hand. "Where are the others?" was his next question. "I have no idea, Herr Rittmeister," I replied, "but I suspect that most of them went back." "Do me the only favor and find all the II Batl. together that you can find and send them here." After an hour I happily had 12 men together and got in touch again. ["]Occupy- [520] put the wayside here! We still have to push out. In front everything is back; Relief is expected every hour.—Do you know the way to Villers-Bretonneux?" "I'll find him!" "Then find out if the village is again occupied by the enemy." "Your command, Herr Rittmeister!"

I was on my way immediately. A pungent odor forced me to put on the gas mask, which, however, was a real hindrance. I reached the first houses without incident; almost all were shot to pieces. Some were still smoking, and under the burning beams on the street, dead people lay everywhere, French, English, German. In fact, there seemed to be no living beings left in the village. That gives me courage and I pushed further. But suddenly there was a shot. Then another and another again. I felt a little nudge on the back of my right side—then the last bit of coffee flowed out of my perforated canteen. "Now it's about time that I wasted away, otherwise another hole will be shot in my head!" I ran back as fast as my gas mask would allow. The thing ballooned violently and shrunk with every breath. So I just ripped it off and stuffed my handkerchief in my mouth. So I happily reached my battalion again and was able to bring my report.

The morning dawned. We were still lying in the ditch by the farm. Detachment did not come. We had no connection either on the right or on the left. We lay still all day. Cut off from everyone else; therefore always in danger of being surrounded by the enemy. But nothing stirred on the other side either; only artillery shots were exchanged. 20m from us there was a goulash cannon. The horses were dead and lying next to it. I crawled there hoping to find something else, but it was in vain: emptied to the bottom. It was high time when the relief came in the evening. Twelve men strong, the battalion marched back to Marcelcave. The others were there. Two days later, with the knowledge that we had done our duty, we were able to travel in peace for four weeks to Le Cateau.